the

ORGANIZED MIND

Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload

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DANIEL J. LEVITIN

New York Times bestselling author of
This Is Your Brain on Music

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Annotation

This is the abstract of *Daniel Levitin's book*

Taken from https://www.blinkist.com/en/reader/the-organized-mind-en/

Who should read it?

Anyone who wants to be more organized

Anyone who is interested in the way our brain processes data

Anyone struggling with the information overload of modern life

Who's the author?

Daniel Levitin is a cognitive psychologist and neuroscientist. He is particularly well known for his work in music theory. He has authored several best-selling books, including This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession, and The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature.

New York Times bestselling author and neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin shifts his keen insights from your brain on music to your brain in a sea of details.

The information age is drowning us with an unprecedented deluge of data. At the same time, we're expected to make more—and faster—decisions about our lives than ever before. No wonder, then, that the average American reports frequently losing car keys or reading glasses, missing appointments, and feeling worn out by the effort required just to keep up.

But somehow some people become quite accomplished at managing information flow. In The Organized Mind, Daniel J. Levitin, PhD, uses the latest brain science to demonstrate how those people excel—and how readers can use their methods to regain a sense of mastery over the way they organize their homes, workplaces, and time.

With lively, entertaining chapters on everything from the kitchen junk drawer to health care to executive office workflow, Levitin reveals how new research into the cognitive neuroscience of attention and memory can be applied to the challenges of our daily lives. This Is Your Brain on Music showed how to better play and appreciate music through an understanding of how the brain works. The Organized Mind shows how to navigate the churning flood of information in the twenty-first century with the same neuroscientific perspective.

- The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload
- What's in it for me? Learn to organize your life!
- The brain can only focus on a limited number of stimuli at a

time.

- Because we're surrounded by more and more information, we're forced to make more and more decisions.
- Find a designated place for every single object.
- Give your brain a break – move your organizational processes outside your head.
- Junk drawers for miscellaneous items are incredibly effective – use them every day.
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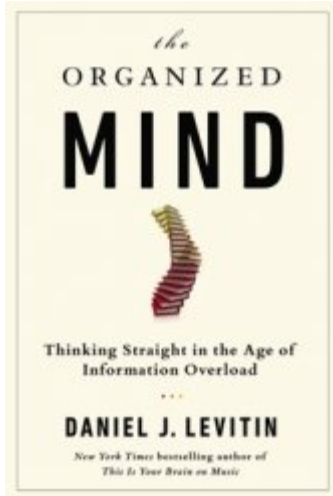
- It's important to think about the worst-case scenario so you're always prepared.
- We can't know the answer to every question, but we can know where and how to find it!
- Get to grips with probabilities or lose a vital skill for assessing information.
- Final summary

The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload

What's in it for me? Learn to organize your life!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Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload
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The way our brain manages information often seems mysterious. Daniel Levitin lifts the veil and reveals the systems that are at work every time we drive a car, learn something new, or try to remember where we put something.

With a greater understanding of these processes, you'll be better equipped to take charge in organizing your life. You'll also discover how to apply simple techniques, learn the best way to remain productive at work and even how to cope with situations that are out of your control.

In the following blinks, you'll also learn:

how the brain of a taxi driver looks different to your brain;

how to be more effective by working less; and why Google confronts potential employees with an unsolvable question.

The brain can only focus on a limited number of stimuli at a time.

Have you ever told yourself that you'd like to "get organized?" It's an easy promise to make, but difficult to put into action. So where can you get started?

Well, before we even approach this challenge, we must first understand in greater detail the way our mind works, more specifically, our *attentional system.* This is the way our brain handles and categorizes information. The times we live in pose a great challenge to this system, because our brains aren't equipped to cope with the flood of new facts and sights that we face everyday. Instead, brains work best when concentrating on one thing at a time.

This was vital for our ancestors, who hunted successfully by staying highly focused. Their thoughts would only be disrupted by important events, such as an approaching predator.

Nowadays, we're constantly attempting to do many things at once. Driving a car, listening to the radio, thinking about an upcoming business meeting – it's not unusual that all these things happen simultaneously. This is something that our brain has not evolved to do successfully, which means that multitasking comes at a price.

When we switch our attention between different activities, our brain is unable to function effectively. This in turn causes us to make thoughtless mistakes, or forget and misplace things.

In order to better understand our attentional system, we also need to consider how our brain decides *how* to divide its attention. It's all to do with the brain's remarkable ability to detect changes.

Our brains are more likely to pay attention to changes than constants. For example, imagine you're driving your car. You suddenly notice that the road feels bumpy. Prior to this, you didn't even consider how even the street was, simply because this was not useful information.

But that realization could be vital, because it alerts you to a treacherous change in surface or a problem with your car.

Changing circumstances can pose a threat to our survival.

Because we're surrounded by more and more information, we're forced to make more and more decisions.

Decisions are part of everyday life: Should we opt for the cheaper internet plan, or pay more and get unlimited data? Should we respond to this email now, or read these texts first? We confront decisions like these nearly every minute. But how can our brain cope with this non-stop flow of decisions when it originally evolved to process one idea at a time?

It's simple: We can manage the flood of information by focusing our attention. But how, exactly?

As we learned in the previous blink, our brain instinctively concentrates on the information that is most important for us.

Here's an example: Imagine you're on a busy street, desperately looking for your lost dog. You automatically fade out all unnecessary details like the people, cars and buses, and only focus on things that are the same size and color as your dog. So unless there are a lot of other things on this street that are about knee-height, fluffy and brown, your brain immediately makes it easier to find your beloved pet.

This automatic process of honing our focus down to what's necessary should also be reflected in our decision making. In other words, you shouldn't spend too much time on less important everyday choices. Instead, find shortcuts and ways to simplify your decision making.

For example, one type of decision we often need to make is about purchasing products or services that can make our lives easier. A good way to analyze these decisions is by thinking about the monetary value of our own time, because it allows us to compare it to the benefit the product promises.

Let's say you're thinking about hiring someone to clean your home instead of doing it yourself. Just ask yourself: would you be willing to pay $50 for two extra hours of free time? If the answer is yes, then go for it without deliberating any further!

Now that we've learned how to streamline our decision making, the following blinks will consider how to organize more aspects of our lives in the most effective way.

Find a designated place for every single object.

When was the last time you lost your keys, phone or glasses? It seems ridiculous that the objects we need with us all the time are also the ones that seem to go wandering most often. The reason is straightforward: We lose these objects because we carry them around with us. Objects that we only use in one place, like our toothbrush, seldom get lost at all.

There is, in fact, a special part of our brain dedicated specifically to remembering the location of things. It's called the hippocampus, and it was crucial for our ancestors who needed to know where a watering hole was, or the areas where predators might pounce.

In order to learn more about our hippocampi, researchers studied the brains of London taxi drivers, as they are required to commit the city's street plan to memory. The tests revealed that the hippocampi of the drivers were larger than average, meaning they are better able to recall the locations of certain streets, for example.

However, the hippocampus can only provide us with information about objects whose location doesn't change. This isn't a problem for a taxi driver trying to remember how to get to a particular building, but a constant problem for us when we try to remember where our frustratingly mobile keys are.

To ensure that you don't always have to seek out these essential items, simply find a designated place for them. A special bowl next to the door for your keys always does the trick!

If you can't set aside a certain place for an object, then it may also help to purchase duplicates. For example, if you need reading glasses, having a single location for them might prove frustrating as you may need them in different places. Instead, you could purchase a pair for your bedroom for nighttime reading, while another pair remains at work.

Give your brain a break – move your organizational processes outside your head.

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by all the different ideas and thoughts floating around inside your head? The best way to ensure you can keep track of them is to organize them outside your head.

A time-tested trick to unburden your brain is to write things down. Good old-fashioned flash cards are an easy and effective way to record and organize ideas as soon as you think of them.

For example, you might be on the bus and suddenly remember that you still have to buy a birthday present for your aunt. Don't stress, just write it down and you'll no longer have the burden of trying to remember it all day!

On the other hand, if you think of something that you could do right away – such as calling your aunt to say happy birthday – then don't think twice, do it immediately. Think of it in terms of the two-minute rule: If the task takes longer than two minutes to complete, then write it down. Otherwise, do it straight away.

Another effective approach is to organize your written thoughts into categories. This mirrors the way our brains are constantly categorizing new stimuli and helps simplify our thinking, thus saving time and increasing our attention capacity.

For example, if we see a flying object with feathers, our brain recognizes it as part of the category "bird." Though this bird might be a hawk or an eagle, it's easier to place it in this broader category rather than identify it specifically.

The same goes for our flash cards – collect them together and sort them into different groups according to the topics they relate to. These could be categories such as "Personal Life," "Work" or "Kids."

This way you'll be able to keep your thoughts and ideas organized and accessible.

Junk drawers for miscellaneous items are incredibly effective – use them every day.

We've seen how creating categories is a great way to organize our thoughts and our lives. But what should we do with objects and ideas that don't seem to belong in any pigeonhole? Well, these miscellaneous items can form their own category.

The categorizing tendencies of the brain can be seen in the way that we organize our living spaces. In our homes, there's usually at least one place where random objects like single light bulbs, paper clips or car-cleaning products go. Why? Because it wouldn't make sense to have a special drawer for light bulbs if you only had a few – combining them with other spare objects is much more space efficient.

You could even use one of these *junk drawers* at work. A miscellaneous folder, perhaps, containing documents that don't fit into other folders but are also too important to dispose of. However, junk drawers will only be effective if we perform a little bit of maintenance from time to time.

The first way to do this is to keep checking their content regularly. This stops us losing track of what's in there, which would reduce its organizational advantage. Some items can be eliminated from a junk drawer – if you're sorting through objects that you haven't yet felt the need to use, it's unlikely that you'll need them in the future. These can be thrown out.

You may also find that items in junk drawers can be moved to other places for more specific types of objects later. For example, perhaps you've recently developed an interest in scrapbooking. If you go through your junk drawer, you'll almost certainly discover objects that could find a new home in the scrapbooking drawer – that extra pair of scissors, maybe, or the double-sided sticky tape.

Set aside time to refuel so you can increase your productivity later.

Everyone knows that you tend to be far more productive after a good night's sleep. And yet, we're often tempted to skip a few hours of kip in order to work just a little bit more.

This, however, is a mistake. Our brain works incredibly hard while we sleep, processing new information from the day and integrating it into our existing knowledge. Memories, problems and ideas often appear in our dreams and we may find ourselves better

positioned to solve a problem after “sleeping on it.”

This phenomenon is backed up by studies. Researchers found that students attempting to solve a problem performed better following a night of sleep than a night spent awake. Ultimately, you’re *twice* as likely to solve a problem after you’ve slept on it. This shows that sleep is essential, and attempting to work when you’re tired is counterproductive.

Sleep isn’t the only way that we can refuel our minds. Many companies have discovered the benefits of decreasing their employees’ working time and providing designated “rest hours.”

One such company is Microsoft, where employees at the campus are welcome to use the in-house spa. This reflects Microsoft’s understanding of the need to refuel – workers found they were much more productive after relaxing there.

The accounting firm Ernst & Young improved worker performance by allowing additional vacation time. By supplying their employees with ten extra hours of vacation, they increased productivity by eight percent.

It’s important to think about the worst-case scenario so you’re always prepared.

Imagine this: You’re on vacation and have just found out that the airline has lost your luggage.

How would you react? Of course it’s good to be optimistic – perhaps they’ll find your bag! But it’s better still to be prepared. Good thing you brought that extra toothbrush!

Each time you plan something, you should consider all the things that could go wrong and think of a solution to them before they occur. Planning for failure in this way needn’t be difficult – it’s as straightforward as placing an extra key under the flowerpot by your front door.

A plan B is especially important in business situations. It’s true that sometimes things just happen. You forget an important appointment, or you lose the contact details of someone you need to speak to.

But, if you plan your time ahead, these mistakes will be less likely. With the assistance of an electronic calendar, either on your phone, computer, or both, you can ensure you’ll never forget about meetings again.

A plan B at work can also include keeping an extra shirt in your office, in case you accidentally spill your coffee before an important appointment with your boss!

It’s also important that we don’t rely on technology alone to prevent us from slipping up. Phones, computers and other technical devices aren’t perfect and at some point will let us down without warning. This is why you should also prepare non-technical solutions as a backup.

This is something that your taxi driver does. They always keep a plastic credit card press in their car in case their electronic credit card machines doesn’t work. This way, they can ensure they don’t lose any fares due to technical failure.

We can't know the answer to every question, but we can know where and how to find it!

Today, we lead very different lives to our grandparents. One of the greatest changes is the way we can easily access vast amounts of information in no time at all. Googling something takes less than a minute! Nevertheless, there's one important question we should continually ask ourselves: Is this information reliable?

Many of us have used Wikipedia before. The information it can provide us on a wide range of topics is hugely helpful, but is subject to a major drawback. Anyone is able to edit the information on a Wikipedia page, so we can never immediately be sure whether it is reliable. This means we should take the time to verify the information.

In order to evaluate whether a website is a valuable source or not, we can first investigate whether any reliable websites, such as established news services or government websites link to the website. If so, the site itself is likely to be reliable, and information can also be verified by cross-checking it with the content on several other websites.

However, not every problem can be solved by checking online. In complex dilemmas, particularly in the workplace, you'll need to think for yourself in order to find solutions. Inventive and innovative thinking is something you just can't google for! In such cases, the ability to reason, estimate and develop hypothetical assumptions is vital.

For example, in Google's own job interviews, potential candidates are confronted with a question that has no correct answer. Here's one for you to try on for size: "How much does the Empire State Building weigh?" Google was interested in whether the candidate could use their logical skills to work through a problem on their own, for example, by calculating the approximate size and weight of the concrete used for the building.

Get to grips with probabilities or lose a vital skill for assessing information.

Imagine you're at a university where ten percent of students are engineers. Look, here comes a student wearing a pocket protector: a plastic sheath for holding pens in your shirt pocket. Now, what would you say is the probability that this is an engineering student?

The fact that a pocket protector is a standard accessory for the stereotypical nerdy student might cause many of you to think he very likely studies engineering. But remember the ten percent ratio. If 90 percent of students aren't engineers, it's far more likely that our pocket-protector friend doesn'tstudy engineering.

Our initial misconception reflects the way in which a person or situation that seems a perfect example of something can cause us to ignore the base rate. A base rate is the probability of an event occurring without taking other factors into account.

Because of this tendency, it's vital that we critically assess the way in which statistics are presented to us. After all, many of our important decisions may involve statistics, so our understanding of them should be unbiased.

Imagine that you're very sick. Your doctor offers you a treatment that will increase the likelihood of your recovery by ten percent. If the treatment increases your likelihood of recovery from zero to ten percent, then you'll still have little chance of survival. But, if it increases from 90 percent to 100 percent, your recovery is guaranteed, and you'll certainly be on board!

What if it increases from 20 percent to 30 percent? You might hesitate and inquire about the side effects and cost of the treatment before agreeing.

From a statistical perspective, this is bizarre since in all of these cases, the increase of ten percent is the same. The scenarios just feel different because of their varying starting points.

Though our brains often have difficulty dealing with probabilities, by remembering the mathematics behind them, we can make our choices with a greater and more objective understanding of their implications.

Final summary

The key message in this book:

We live in an age of information overload. This presents a challenge for our brains, which are wired to manage information by focusing attention on one thing at a time. By learning about the way our brain distinguishes, focuses and categorizes, we can better organize our own lives.

Actionable advice:

Increase productivity by increasing your sleeping hours, not your working hours.

Studies have demonstrated the way in which sleep improves your brain's ability to solve complex problems. The expression "sleep on it" has real biological significance, and an awareness of this will allow us to be more effective at work. So next time you've got a large task, don't sacrifice your sleep to work on it – you'll be much more effective when you allow your brain to refuel and continue work in the morning.

Suggested further reading: Make it Stick by Peter C. Brown

Make It Stick is a critical update on our way of thinking about learning and memory. Taking the traditional ways of learning to task for being ineffective, and even counterproductive, the book uses recent scientific findings to suggest how we can learn more effectively and improve our memories along the way.